Housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France is a fifteenth century manuscript fragment of Quintus Curtius’ *History of the Life of Alexander the Great*. One of its illuminations depicts its translator, Dr. Vasco Fernandes de Lucena, presenting a volume to Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (1467–77). Lucena, a fascinating character, has been the subject of disagreement among Portuguese historians and French literary scholars. But a composite picture of his life can give us insight into what it meant to study and write history at the turn of the sixteenth century. As an active lobbyist for Portuguese interests, Dr. Vasco Fernandes de Lucena had devoted most of his life to international diplomacy: serving as a delegate at the Council of Basel in 1435, at the court of Pope Nicholas V (1447–55) in 1450 and as an influential member of the household of the Duchess of Burgundy, Isabel of Portugal from 1461 until perhaps around 1473. About this time, he returned to Portugal to take up the office of *Crónista Mor*, the chief historian of the realm, but in spite of holding this position for more than a quarter of a century, he never authored a single work.

Dr. Vasco Fernandes de Lucena was not, however, inactive as a historian. In 1468, he appears to have been translating history for political ends: to augment the prestige of King Afonso V of Portugal (1438–81), whose crusade in Morocco and expanding ‘empire’ could be likened to the achievements of Alexander the Great. Since 1453, the year in which the Ottomans had captured Constantinople, the political appetite for religious warfare had grown considerably and in 1464, the Duke of Burgundy had supported Afonso V’s campaigns in North Africa. The illumination of Lucena and Charles the Bold, tinted into the frontispiece of Curtius’ history of the famed king of Macedon, was likely a gentle prompt, entreating Charles the Bold to follow in his father’s footsteps. (See Figure 1) On at least two occasions, Lucena travelled to the Holy See to pledge obedience to the pope. In the oration of 1485, he recounted the deeds of all of the kings of Portugal

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1 BNF, Mss fr. 22547, f. 1.
in order to showcase the achievements of his own sovereign, King João II (1481–95). Through Lucena, one can see how History formed part of contemporary political discourse.

The success of the Portuguese Crónistas Mores was such that their works still form the narrative framework for the history of Golden Age Portugal centuries later. But the primacy that they ascribed to certain themes: political legitimacy, crusade and the search for the sea-route to India needs to be re-evaluated by historians who seek to understand the political dynamics of the period. As historian Gabrielle Spiegel first pointed out in 1975, chroniclers of the Middle Ages saw political utility in their work; they wrote about the past in order to comment on and influence the present.4 Though carefully researched and written in close temporal proximity to the events they recounted, many of the histories are not simple iterations of the past. To the writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the accuracy of historical detail was much less important than the moral lessons that could be drawn from historical example. Thus popes, princes and statesmen carefully studied and translated the histories of classical writers such as Livy, Cicero and Quintilian. And in the translations that they produced and in their chronicles of more recent times, they recognized not only the power to teach, but also the power to persuade. Overt political messages, packaged in history, were well received by an alert audience that had been educated by allegory and steeped in legacy.

Recently, Richard Kagan has argued that royal historians of the early modern period devoted even more energy to the political uses of history than their medieval predecessors. Endowed with greater resources, the kings of Golden Age Spain and Portugal were able to commission official histories that legitimized their reigns. By their chroniclers, ruling dynasties were imbued with the noblest of intentions. Controversial political actions were justified and many unsavoury episodes were (as much as possible) glossed over. As Kagan wrote, it can be useful “to compare the official historians to the slick fast-talking press officers who surround today’s democratic political leaders and engage in what is colloquially known as ‘spin’, selective but still accurate readings of the evidence relating to a particular happening or event.”5

It is important for us to remember that these chroniclers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not only writers and historians, but statesmen. The details that have survived about the life of Dr. Vasco Fernandes de Lucena are
